

August 4, 2019
Jed Linder
“A New Song”
Psalm 40:1-11



Let me just start by saying, “thank you.” You all have been very hospitable and kind to me this past month. I really am excited to be here, and I am excited to be a part of Saint Paul. So, thank you for making me feel so welcome and at home.

Now, since this is my first sermon here, it will be a bit unique because I’m trying to do two things instead of one: 1) Proclaim God’s Word, which I always do (and it’s what a sermon is), and 2) introduce a little bit more of myself while in the pulpit, so to speak. So, while I don’t typically like to point to myself all that much in sermons, today I’ll make somewhat of an exception. And I’ll tell some of my own story, including some of my time working in the entertainment industry in Hollywood. Hence, I choose this passage from Psalm 40; or, I suppose it was kind of chosen for me long ago. This text has had a radical, really prophetic, influence in my life as you’ll soon see, and I hope that after this morning, it might have a positive influence in your own lives as well.

But before we begin, let me first pray:

Gracious God, We give you thanks for this time of worship, fellowship, and your Word. Pour out your Spirit now and lead my words, and open our ears, and our hearts, and speak plainly your message to us in this morning. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

WHAT GOD HAS DONE

Our psalm opens with the psalmist recounting when God delivered him from a terrible time of trouble in the past, though it is not completely clear what that terrible time actually was. The psalm is attributed to King David, though we don’t really know who wrote any of the psalms for certain. If it really was David, it could be recounting any of number of times he was in trouble. It might be when he was on the run from the Philistines, or, perhaps, when he was on the run from King Saul, or maybe when he was on the run from his own son, Absalom. David did a lot of running in his life. But, like I said, it’s not specified – purposefully I’m sure – because these words are more powerful that way. They could account for any number of people in the Bible, or in the past generally. They could also account for any number of us right here in the present.

Now right from the beginning, the language used powerful and instructive. The psalmist uses some imagery commonly used in ancient prayers and poems, and language we see often in the Old Testament. The psalmist describes being stuck in a “desolate pit,” and a “miry bog.” Language like this often connotes Sheol, or the ancient Hebrew realm of the dead. So this is powerful imagery pointing to a serious, even life-threatening, situation in which the psalmist was stuck.

We see similar illustrations used in contemporary pop-culture. For instance, when I was a kid, I always thought that quicksand was going to be a *much bigger* problem than it actually turned out to be.¹ You see, it was a real problem for characters in the cartoons, TV shows, and movies. I think it is like the third leading cause of death in cartoons behind falling pianos and anvils. I'd see it so much, I think I even used to pray about it. And if we ever did get caught in quicksand, I just hoped Lassie would be within shouting distance! But, I can honestly say that, in my over 40 years I have not once had to deal with real-life quicksand...ever.

But quicksand is an apt analogy, and it is useful here. When characters step into quicksand they become stuck unable to get out while they steadily sink. Even worse, fighting the quicksand only makes you sink faster. Characters realize very quickly that the only way you'll get out is if you get help from someone else. Sounds familiar to other things in our lives? Perhaps it's someone fighting cancer, or another disease, that metastasizes, and grows, and its impossible to fight on your own. Or, maybe it's debt that continues to build up, and no matter what you do, you can't seem to get your head back above water. Whatever the case may be, despite your continuing to struggle, you just keep sinking and, ultimately, outside help is needed!

Even worse are those times when you're in the pit, and instead of fighting or seeking help, you just kind of give up completely. It's like the SWAMP OF SADNESS from The NeverEnding Story (1984). If you didn't ever see the movie or read the book, the Swamp of Sadness take the life of anyone in it that gives up hope – they just kind of sink into nothingness. And in one of the more traumatic moments from movie watching as a child, the hero loses his best friend and horse in the swamp, he just gave up living right before our eyes.

But this is not just a movie, despair is a real problem in the USA right now, people are just giving up on life. For the first time in decades we see a dip in the life expectancy in the US thanks to what are called “deaths of despair.” These refer to premature deaths from substance abuse, like alcohol and opioids, and suicide. In the most prosperous country in the world, we have generations of people overwhelmed by anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. I, myself, have dealt with a very serious depression during my senior year in high school.

It happened right after the holidays, when it often does, and though it's tempting to try and point to one situation in particular, this was definitely a conglomeration of things. I was finishing my semester finals, I was a few months away from graduation, I was faced with the prospects of moving away from my family and friends after school, I had college application essays to write, I had two broken friendships, and one failed relationship. All of this was overwhelming to me. My life as I knew it was changing completely and I couldn't do anything about it. I was helpless.

I first noticed that anxious feeling in my stomach, that nervous tension that was just always there. It was there when I went to sleep, and it was there when I woke up. It got so bad I didn't really want to wake up. When I did, I'd go to school and either sleep in my car, or go into class only to leave early crying. I lost a ton of weight, my grades slipped, I became isolated, and neither I nor my family knew how to get me better. To top it all off, the winter was particularly bitter that year, and I felt just as grey, as cold, and as dead as the world looked around me.

¹ This is borrowed from a comedy routine from John Mulaney: New In Town (2012).

It is during these periods in life, when we are stuck in the pit or the miry bog, that it's so easy for our horizons to narrow. Yes, when things are well I point to the Lord as my savior, but when the ground gives away from beneath my feet and I begin to sink, it's easy to give up hope – to forget what I was once so sure of before. When you have that existential crisis recognizing how little, if any, control you have over a situation and you need help, you need someone you can count on no matter what, to whom will you turn? One can wait eagerly for the Lord, but in the pit, it's all too easy to starting asking if the Lord is ever going to show up?

Now, at one point in time, it is possible that the psalmist may have had some uncertainty about God showing up... or, maybe not. But, by Psalm 40, the psalmist is positive God is going to come through. God has come through in the past, and God is going to come through again. You see, the psalmist knows who God is – indeed, that's what he's testifying about through most of the psalm – and when you know who God is, you become confident in what God will do.

WHO GOD IS

If someone asks for a comprehensive description of who exactly God is, it can be easy to get a little tongue-tied. How does humanity describe God? Do we even have any words that are adequate? We might say “God is good” or “God is love,” and while God is definitely both of those things, those words can actually mean different things to different people. For example, McDonald's used to use the slogan “I'm loving it,” and many of us are familiar with the political slogan “love is love.” Now while one may support these political goals, and one may even love a quarter pounder with cheese, if we're not careful, we might misunderstand love to be only self-interested. But can't love also be selfless? This is one of the big dangers in what Jane warned against last week, namely, “Greeting Card Christianity.” Our already limited language becomes simplified even further, and our words fail us.

Now, all this to say, yes, the Bible does use words to describe God, in fact the Psalmist uses some real heavy-hitters right in our text including: “righteousness” (translated from the Hebrew *tsedeqah*, which carries with it the idea of being in right relationship with others), “faithfulness,” “salvation,” “truth,” and “steadfast love” (translated from the Hebrew *hesed*, which is a very robust term that carries with it faithful love, kindness, loyalty, and, selfless love; this is often compared to the Greek term “agape”). Verses 10-11 are actually quite remarkable in that they include all these words together, and each one of these terms can be found scattered throughout the Old Testament describing who God is. But when looking at the context in which the words are used, one begins to notice that these terms always seem to appear *after* the text talks about *what God has done*. To put it simply, God is defined by what God has done. God does it Godself in the opening of the Ten Commandments: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2, KJV). So, again, God is defined by what God has done. This is not too unlike Jane's 4th point of Progressive Christianity that says the way we behave towards others is the “fullest expression of what we believe.” Thus, we too become defined by what we do.

So this is how the psalmist can be so sure... he knows God, i.e., he knows what God does. He's seen it personally in his own life, and he's seen it personally in the life of his community. He's

seen it, and heard of it so often, and he's telling everyone about it. He is singing about it, he is singing a new song.

Again, the language is telling here, when the Psalmist says "new song." For one, he is indicating that God has done something new and different in his life, he's been rescued from his difficulty in a new and unexpected way. This rescue was different – as all are – and deserves a new song. Additionally, the language indicates there are other songs, old songs, or past things that God has done before. You cannot have "new" without "old." That's why the psalmist can boldly proclaim, "You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted" (v. 5). These previous acts, these gracious acts of deliverance and love are actually too many for the psalmist to count! Again, we have God defined by what God has done, and what God has done is what God will continue to do. And with each new act, each new song to add to the hymnal, God's faithfulness, God's *tsedeqah*, God's *hesed*, is affirmed, and we learn to trust God just a little more; in other words, we are changed. With each new difficulty, and each new divine deliverance, we are changed, and we grow.

REORIENTATION

That's why Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggeman calls these "psalms of reorientation."² You see, these psalm writers recognize things will never be the same. They recognize that going through a terrible storm in her or his life leaves an indelible mark upon one's soul. This is something every screenwriter in Hollywood worth her or his salt knows: conflict changes a character, and the higher the stakes, the greater the change will be. So in each story, the conflict is introduced in the 1st act, worked out in the 2nd act, and resolved in the 3rd act, and by the end, the character has changed and grown one way or another. Of course, that change can vary depending on the orienting force driving the character. That's why the Pharisee named Saul who persecutes Jesus' followers can become St. Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, and why Anakin Skywalker can become Darth Vader. The orienting force drives the change, and when that force is God's gracious love and salvation, we become transformed into a more confident, secure, and God-revering people.

Thus, where once when I was sinking into the muck and mire, helplessly descending into the void where no one could reach, except God, now I've been restored, my feet put on solid ground: I am God's and I'm going to tell people about it! And so I sing a new song. And, make no mistake, the new song is part of the deliverance. In fact, the psalms reckon that deliverance isn't actually complete until you've told others about it. This is, of course, to give God the glory God deserves, but it is also to give hope to those going through their own troubles, sinking into their own miry bogs and desolate pits. Part of the work of the church is after we get out of the pit ourselves, we turn right back around and let God use us to give someone else a hand. To reach out to the suffering, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. For God's delivering work is not simply a private matter, it is a public matter, even a missional matter where we reach out beyond our own church walls just as Jesus Christ did 2,000 years ago.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 123-124.

And we when we tell others about it, we also keep it fresh in our memory. Because, the reality is, that things will get bad again sometime in the future, for no deliverance is final on this side of things. We simply are not promised a future free of pain. As St. Augustine puts it, “there will come days of tribulations, and of greater tribulations... Let no one promise himself what the Gospel does not promise.”³ Or, if you prefer, as comedian Norm Macdonald says, “the best news your Doctor can give you is that you don’t have anything yet... come back next year and maybe then I’ll have some soul-shattering news for you.” Even the psalmist recognizes it, because Psalm 40 does not end at verse 11, it actually ends at verse 17, and guess what the psalmist moves to after 11? Troubles, he is facing troubles again and he calls on God to act because he knows that is who God is.

So, unless someone dies prematurely, suffering is inevitable in life. And we can choose to respond in two very different ways: either sink into the miry pit of despair, or courageously go forth singing songs of deliverance with the confidence that God will have the last word, not pain, not suffering, not even death. ***God will have the last word.***

CONCLUSION

Now, this is where I would typically end the sermon, but remember, I’m supposed to tell a bit about myself, and I kind of left my story of depression in its 2nd act – I was still in the pit. But my story didn’t end there, I still need to complete my own testimony!

The turn around came unexpectedly one night. I opened my Bible looking for some kind of hopeful message, some kind of direct sign from God, maybe I’d open directly to a verse that says: “Everything’s going to be okay, Jed” But that’s not actually in the Bible, and, at first, I don’t remember turning to anything that spoke directly to me. As I was closing the book, I felt a sudden prompt to turn to the bookmarked page (you know the ribbons that would come in the Bible, already randomly inserted to a page). So I opened to the bookmark, and right before my eyes was God speaking directly to me with one particular verse. I ran downstairs and told my mom, and she wrote it on a 3 x 5 card, and tucked it away. From that time on, things began to change.

Seventeen years later, I’m preparing my first sermon in seminary, and I’d been randomly assigned Psalm 43, which happens to be a psalm on depression. Now I had honestly forgotten what the verse was that God had given me so many years ago, and I called and asked my mom if she remembered, I thought it would be so cool if it was of the passage I was going to preach on. And, yes, my mom remembered, and she gave me the 3 x 5 card. It turns out, the verse wasn’t actually from psalm 43, instead it was psalm 40:3: The LORD put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and rejoice, and put their trust in the LORD (NRSV).

And I remembered that new song God gave me. And it was as if I was now given the chance to sing it out loud, and that these were the plans God had for me all along. Just like the psalmist, I was to “tell” the good news, the verb in Greek is actually *kerygma*, which some translate as

³ Augustine, “Exposition on Psalm 40,” from *Exposition on the Psalms*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801040.htm>, accessed on July 30, 2019.

“proclaim,” while others simply say, “preach.” I would preach the good news in the great congregation.

The good news of the God who listened to me...

The good news of the God who came to me in the pit...

The good news of the God who delivered me when I was lost...

The good news of the God who has given me a reason to testify...

And so, as the psalmist says, let many “see and rejoice, and put their trust in the LORD” (v. 3, NRSV).

Let me pray:

Gracious God, ... Thank you for your continual acts of steadfast love that deliver us from the many trials and tribulations of life. We do hope and pray for as much peace and joy as possible... but when trouble arises, may you never allow it to overwhelm us, may you never allow us to face it alone, and may you never allow it to linger long. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.